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Commentary: COVID-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: International Mobility and Students' Social Protection

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of our lives and exacerbated existing inequalities. One major area that has experienced a fundamental transformation is higher education, as teaching has become digitalized almost overnight across the globe. Campuses were ordered to be evacuated, leaving the lively classrooms, laboratories, dorms and cafeterias abandoned. In an attempt to prevent further spread of the virus, schools cancelled graduation events.

Although local students could go back to their parental homes, not all international students could return to their countries of origin immediately or at all due to closed borders and suspended international flights. Many were stuck on deserted campuses and locked-down cities and were anxious and concerned not only for themselves but also for significant others who live in another country. In addition to uncertainties in terms of their education and financial situation as well as healthcare concerns, international students, particularly those from China and other parts of Asia, experienced social exclusion and xenophobic attitudes and, at times, became victims of discrimination and verbal assaults. In this commentary, I address the major uncertainties of higher education systems in which international students find themselves as well as students' well-being and their need for social protection.

IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY ON HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND SOCIETIES AT LARGE

According to the latest statistics by UNESCO 2019, in 2017, there were around 5.3 million international students worldwide, and these numbers have been increasing steadily. Since early 2000s, China has been the largest country of origin for international students worldwide. This overall trend in mobility is expected to slow down for the next few years, if not to drop off suddenly. The decrease in the number of international student numbers will have severe consequences for higher education institutions, mainly in the Global North, particularly those for which international student tuition fees are the main source of income. We already have witnessed substantial layoffs of adjunct faculty members as the first attempt for universities to save costs at the expense of quality in education. The pandemic further revealed long-existing problems in academia, such as temporary contracts that involve adjunct teaching activities.

Amidst the uncertainties, it is crucial that students, including international ones, can continue their education. To this end, online learning has made it possible for (international) students to

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follow and finish their courses. In this regard, however, access to the Internet has been a marker of social inequality, dividing even further, in a short time, students who have access to a stable connection and those who do not. Moreover, some types of learning, for example use of laboratories for natural science or engineering students or patient visits in hospitals for medical students, constitute a crucial part of the student learning experience that is being jeopardized. Although having an online education, so that the teaching can continue and students can receive an education and their diplomas, is currently the best option, education in general, and international education in particular, also is about one's social life in a new academic and cultural environment. Further, not all academic staff members were trained for online education, and, for any faculty member, creating an interactive education space can be challenging. Thus, we do not really know yet the extent to which students are satisfied with online education arrangements, not only due their quality but also are related to the loss of in-person interpersonal relationships with fellow students and faculty members.

International students make invaluable social, cultural and economic contributions not only to the places where they study but also to their countries of origin and elsewhere, in terms of how they live and work. Study abroad benefits the international students as well as their local fellow students through what is known as *internationalization at home*, having an international classroom experience with global content and discussions. Receiving an education in an international classroom and through socializing enhances all students' university experience. It is well acknowledged that, with more time spent and friendships forged across different cultures and nationalities, students accumulate intercultural competencies and cooperation, contributing to greater understanding and more tolerant societies. This is especially important when considering the recent surge of nationalistic sentiments and extreme opinion polarizations. Moreover, we all have recently observed how global understanding and cooperation lead the road to change.

Despite the current border closures and uncertainties around next academic year's enrolments, there is still demand from students for international education (QS, 2020). In this regard, one important issue is who will be able to afford to have a study abroad experience, given the anticipated shrinkage of the middle classes globally. The expected global financial hardship will make it even more difficult for students with disadvantaged backgrounds to enter universities and, more so, to participate in the international mobility programs.

Although the steady expansion of higher education systems around the world over decades has made it possible for more students from diverse backgrounds to be admitted to universities, we are now looking at a possible decrease in enrolment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially when the higher education system is mainly privatized. In public education systems, as a strategy to delay entry into the shrinking and unfavourable labour markets, enrolments of local students might increase. Decreasing numbers of international students, however, may hurt universities that rely on the income revenues of certain national economies. When the economy contracts, so does the public spending on education, including scholarships and grants for incoming and outgoing mobility. This can lead to the further stratification of higher education. Thus, to foster international mobility and ensure transnational collaboration, nation-states should make public spending on education a priority.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' WELL-BEING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection refers to tangible and intangible resources that students can mobilize against social risks, such as social exclusion and discrimination. In the case of international students,

formal social protection schemes include nation-state frameworks, such as healthcare systems or regulations of their legal stay and working conditions, universities as semi-formal schemes (e.g. as providers of study and work infrastructures and services, including counselling and student clubs), and students' interpersonal ties as informal safety nets that operate simultaneously.

In addition to concerns about their education, at the time of a global pandemic, international students have been experiencing financial hardships and anxiety about their health and future and the safety of their families, as well as loneliness. A substantial majority of international students have part-time jobs on or off campus, related to scholarships for their tuition fees or to sustain their livelihoods. During the global health crisis, bars, restaurants and libraries, where many students worked, were closed down, leaving (international) students with financial worries.

International student mobility should be understood not as an individual endeavour but as involving families, both financially and emotionally. Although students already were using online communication modalities to keep in touch with their transnational families and to receive emotional support, not being able to fly home if something happens to their families or vice versa has certainly made them more anxious. Given that the majority of international student mobility takes place from the Global South to the Global North, it must have been difficult for many of the families to support their children during the crisis. Thus, tuition fee reduction or further flexible employment possibilities for students are needed.

In terms of health, being in a foreign environment in a lockdown can be difficult even for healthy, young individuals. Notably, international students are a diverse group and include those with chronic health conditions and disabilities. Regardless of health status, timely information, hot-lines and support groups in English and the language of the country of education are critical for these students. Not all international students, however, are proficient in either the language of the country or in English, which also needs to be taken into consideration.

Overall, being in an unwelcoming environment makes it difficult for international students. For example, the United States has been discussing whether to revoke optional practical training (OPT) rights, which were designed for recent international graduates to accumulate work experience through employment and internships. For international students in STEM, OPT provides a 24-month extension for employment and, for other majors, it is often up to a year that students can remain and work in the country. The main argument for revoking OPT is to lessen the alleged reduction of job opportunities for U.S. citizens. Not all major receiving countries, however, have been so unwelcoming. For example, Canada still allows international students who study online to apply for a work permit after graduation. Universities are crucial actors in arranging such help or in negotiating with the governments for the students' rights and well-being, and they need to be active in defending international students' rights.

Finally, universities and cities need to ensure that there are enough health and safety regulations for dorms, campuses and cities in general in regard to international students. Safety and healthcare are likely the main concerns of their families. If we do not want COVID-19 to wreak havoc on international student mobility and further exacerbate social inequalities further, we need to act now.

Peer Review

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